WHAT IS PHILOSOPHY?

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§ THE PLACE OF THE QUESTION: NOTE ON THE DEFINITION OF PHILOSOPHY

What is philosophy? That’s a good question—not because there’s no answer, but because what’s involved in posing it points up something essential to philosophy.

In the Treatise on the Emendation of the Intellect, Spinoza sets out what’s required by a definition. A circle, a typical definition might run, is a figure in which all lines drawn from the center to the circumference are equal. The problem with this definition, what makes it merely verbal, is that it defines a circle by way of one of its properties, not by way of its
essence. Definition, for Spinoza, gets at the essence (from which all properties follow): A complete definition demonstrates how what it defines comes about. The definition of a circle as a figure that is described by any line of which one end is fixed and the other movable, as one commentator has pointed out, “literally generates the circle by providing a procedure whereby we ‘make’ the thing to be defined.”

Philosophy is defined by what takes place in the question of philosophy itself. What Auden said of poetry could also be said of philosophy: it makes nothing happen. Nothing happens, or nothing happens—and in the space of the same few words both can. Philosophy operates that displacement and is defined by it: “what is philosophy?” become “what is philosophy?”—the question persists, but everything has changed.

§ What is Philosophy? Gloss of a Sentence of Giorgio Agamben’s

“In its deepest intention, philosophy is a firm assertion of potentiality, the construction of an experience of the possible as such.”

in its deepest intention

Philosophy, it is said, begins in wonder. Wonder,

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1 Bibliographic references for all citations can be found under “Notes” at the back of the book, keyed to page numbers in the main body of this essay.
however, is both a noun and a verb. Noun: “A feeling of surprise mingled with admiration, caused by something beautiful, unexpected, unfamiliar, or inexplicable.” Verb: “The desire, or curiosity, to know something.”

*philosophy is*

In that light, philosophy is not so much—or not simply—‘the love of wisdom,’ but instead marks the passage from wonder as a noun to wonder as a verb. Philosophy is the love of wisdom to the extent that it remains an incitement to it.

*a firm assertion*

To philosophize has often been to argue. ‘Argument’ comes from the Latin *arguere*, to make clear. To argue might then be said to mean *to give an idea of, to clarify*. In the very divergence of the arguments used and the positions held, what argument and the recourse to it in philosophy testify to before all else—what they clarify—is, precisely, the nature of the possible.

*of potentiality*

Potentiality and possibility alike concern ability or capacity: *what may be*. ‘A firm assertion of potentiality,’ is, in the first place, an affirma-
tion of the importance of *what may be* to *what is*. *What is* is not what it is without what it may be, or may have been. Likewise, and after its own fashion, *what may be* is. Wonder enters the picture between potentiality and actuality, and philosophy affirms their articulation: Surprised admiration at *what is* gives place to what had not yet existed, the desire to know it.

*the construction of*

*To construct* is a transitive verb, which means that *to construct* is always to construct *something*. It is to take something that is given and to make of it something that was not, something it was not, something else. It is to take something as it is for something it may be.

*an experience*

*Experience* shares the same root as *experiment*.

*of the possible as such*

Neither this nor that possibility, but possibility in general, what makes the possible what it is: *What there is not, yet, beyond the desire, its experience: what it might be to know.*

§ *Philosophy: A Life . . .*

There is a tradition according to which philo-
sophy is known as ‘the art of living.’ That definition of philosophy only finds its true sense, however, and not coincidentally, in light of a definition of potentiality first elaborated at philosophy’s outset.

As Giorgio Agamben recounts, Aristotle opposes his definition of potentiality to that of the Megarians. Whereas the Megarians hold that in a given act all potentiality passes into actuality, so that nothing is left over in this passage and potentiality has no independent existence as such, Aristotle holds that potentiality is distinct from actuality and exists on a par with it. At issue between Aristotle and the Megarians is the example of the kithara player. The problem with the Megarians’ position, for Aristotle, is that it fails to distinguish someone who can play the kithara from someone who cannot: on their account it is impossible to say why when one person picks up a kithara she can make music with it while another person cannot. If all potentiality passes immediately and without remainder into actuality, there’s simply music or there’s not.

That consideration leads Aristotle to make what at first glance appears to be a counter-intuitive observation: The difference between someone who can play the kithara and someone who cannot is that the kithara player is capable of not playing the kithara. The real difference between the two takes place, paradoxically, away from the instrument. The kithara player
can be said to be capable of not playing the kithara in a way that it would not make sense to say of someone who is simply incapable of playing it: for the latter, away from the kithara, entertains no relation to it and, to him or her, that absence is a matter of indifference. What is essential to the kithara player’s potential to play the kithara, and what for Aristotle is essential to potentiality more generally, is that what he calls the impotential to do, or be, something is what remains of potentiality that never passes into actuality and serves to distinguish the former from the latter.

In any given instance to be capable of an impotentiality is therefore to be able to be affected by the absence, following cessation, of the activity in question. It is to be one to whom that absence makes a difference.

Philosophy is the art of living in that to be a philosopher is to first be capable of the non-philosophical life. To be a philosopher is to feel the absence of the philosophical life bear on one’s own.